

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHINESE AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Bessie Loo
 Chinese Name: 盧蘇秋齋
 Date of Interview: 3/21/79, 1/10/80
 Interviewer: Jean Wong, Beverly Chan, Emma Louie
 Others Present: none
 Language: English
 Summarizer: Suellen Cheng

Interview Number: 38
 Number of Tapes: 5
 Length: 3 Hours & 21 Minutes

Contents

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary	Tape: <u>1</u> Side <u>A</u>
1	002-016 017-025 026-042	Introduction. Bessie Loo's (BL) father came from Sum Yup, Pun Yu (番餘) when he was 16 years old in 1886. Mother was born in San Francisco. Father built a building for his store, Su Chung Kee, in Hanford, California. It was a general merchandise store which sold dry goods, Chinese goods imported from China. Later father gave a Chinese herbalist space in the store.	
2	043-048 049-062 063-095	The herb business was very good, BL's father sent BL's brother to China to study herbal medicine for 2-3 years. Caucasian customers would come in at three o'clock in the morning and wait for the opening of the store at nine o'clock. BL was always given Chinese herb medicine whenever she was sick. BL associated herbs with Coffee. Chinese herbs were always used in the family. Certain herbs were also used for cooking. Now, BL occasionally uses herbs in soup, such as Ching bo leung or lily root powder.	
3	096-121	BL didn't know why her father settled in Hanford. In her days, there were about 800-900 Chinese in Hanford and the surrounding areas. Sundays were the busiest days with people coming from the towns nearby.	
4	122-129 130-146	There were around 100 Chinese in Hanford. China Alley used to be Su Chong Kee Alley, named after BL's father. BL's parent's marriage was probably an arranged one. BL's maternal grandmother came to the U.S. A very distant relative of BL's father used to work for the railroad, later lived with BL's family until 80 years old and then was sent back to China.	

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
5	147-155	Parents had four children, two sons and two daughters. BL was number three.
	156-186	BL did go to Chinese school. Her brother was well-educated in Chinese and went up and down the coast soliciting money to build a Chinese school in Hanford. Brother taught about ten students in the Chinese school in the basement of father's store. Teacher was hired from San Francisco. There were about 30 students at that time.
6	187-193	The building was donated to King's County Theatre and became a community center.
	194-210	BL studied Chinese for two to three years due to her brother's encouragement.
	211-230	Brother studied Chinese in Fresno and was very good in it. He didn't have much American education.
7	231-262	Brother married a San Francisco girl. The girl passed away and left him with two boys. There were not many Chinese girls in Hanford. BL was the first Chinese to graduate from Hanford Union High School. Brother went back to China to remarry.
	263-270	Always spoke Chinese at home, only spoke English at school.
	271-303	With BL's own children, BL would hire someone from USC to teach her Chinese during the summertime. It was very difficult for the children. BL thought it was very important to learn Chinese but it was too difficult to enforce.
8	304-339	BL went to grammar school and high school in Hanford. Enrolled at UCLA, majoring in education. Mother took ill two years later, BL was called home to take her mother to San Francisco for medical treatment because Chinese believe that one must go to the big city to get proper medical care.
9	340-343	Went to San Francisco Teachers' College and graduated in 1928.
	344-346	BL did her practice teaching at the Commodore Stockton School.
	347-361	After one year's teaching she got married and consequently was forced to give up teaching since in those days schools did not allow married women to teach.
	362-369	In 1936 she and her husband moved to Los Angeles because her husband had a better job offer as a manager of a store.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
9	370-378	In 1936-37, BL was one of four Chinese to get a contract with MGM for the <u>Good Earth</u> . That's the beginning of BL's acting career.
	379-443	In 1939, BL became a casting director for Central Casting. BL took the job only under the condition that she could work at home and take care of the children.
10	444-469	When <u>Dragon Seed</u> was filmed, hundreds of Asians were needed. BL hired not only Chinese, but Japanese as well as Pilipinos.
11	470-474	There was a Chinese Cinema Club on Main and Alameda Streets.
END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A		
1	001-010	Blank.
	011-022	There was a Chinese Cinema Club in Chinatown. All Chinese actors and members of the Screen Extras Guild would go to that club. BL would call the club for help.
	023-036	There were about 50-75 Chinese in the Screen Extras Guild. After they were all hired, BL could hire non-guild members to help.
2	037-054	To some of the Chinese, acting was fun. Through the <u>Good Earth</u> , Chinese became acting conscious. There were not many parts for Asians except for the <u>Good Earth</u> at that time.
	055-073	BL also worked at the studio as an assistant director, e.g. helping casting officers at the studio with names of Chinese, handing out vouchers, giving instructions to Chinese in Chinese.
3	074-078	Tom Gubbins spoke beautiful Chinese.
	079-122	In 1939, Bessie also became an agent for actors taking a 10% commission, paid by the actors/actresses. Before that she did it for no pay.
4	123-129	In those days, extra's wages went from \$5 to \$7.50 to \$10.50 for a day's work.
	130-144	Most Chinese did movie work to supplement their income and for fun.
5	145-175	BL also performed in her high school plays. After high school she went to San Francisco with her mother for the summer, there BL also did singing for a show with seven other Chinese girls.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
5	176-191	Her mother's reaction to Bessie's singing in a show was not very favorable. In those days, it was unheard of for Chinese girls to be in shows.
6	192-199 200-222 223-243	BL got the part in <u>Good Earth</u> through Tom Gubbins. BL's father always wanted her to be a doctor or optometrist but Bessie settled on being a teacher. Her sister didn't have any more than a third grade education and got married through arrangement by her parents. BL remembers some Chinese, particularly the older Chinese men, would make fun of her going to school. They asked her whether she was going to school to learn to run a way.
7	244-251 252-253 254-259	Parents remained in the store at Hanford. None of the children worked in the store. Not a very busy store. Some distant relatives helped in the store. Mother never worked at the store. In the old days, women all stayed home to be a good mother and a good wife. Parents were very old fashioned.
END OF TAPE 1 Side B		
1	001-011 012-039	Blank. BL's parents were old fashioned and adhered to Chinese culture, e.g. prior to Chinese New Year the family members all got new clothes and had their hair nicely combed. No knife and scissors were allowed on New Years Day, etc.
2	040-082	For recreation, BL listened to Chinese music, played basketball, baseball, and rode her bicycle. BL wanted to have a piano, father bought her an organ. BL hid some of the laisee money in order to pay for organ lessons. Mother would not permit her to learn to play piano. BL didn't know the reason. Girls were supposed to be seen and not to be heard in terms of the communication with parents.
3	083-107	BL met her husband at Stanford (in 1925). Husband was attending Berkeley at the time. BL was chosen as the social chairperson.

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2 Side A

Tape: 3 Side A

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
4	108-122	Husband was a manager of Tuck Lab in San Francisco after he graduated from college. Later he was offered a job in Los Angeles as a manager of a pajama shop on Wilcox. He was also a good designer.
	123-147	BL got married in San Francisco, Old St. Mary Cathedral in 1929.
5	148-158	BL had twin girls in 1931. Beverly is now an executive director at McGraw Hill. Angela is working with a travel agency in Los Angeles, married and has one son.
	159-171	Beverly also worked as a fiction editor for <u>McCall's</u> and later for <u>Ladies' Home Journal</u> .

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

1	001-013 014-035	Introduction. BL was born in 1902 in Hanford. Father's building was at No. 10, China Alley, originally named Su Chong Kee Alley.
2	036-043 044-050 051-063 064-082	BL didn't know why father settled in Hanford. Mother was born in San Francisco. BL was sure the marriage was arranged. Sister got married in 1915, also through arrangement. BL came to UCLA In 1920. Mother took ill in 1922. BL went to San Francisco with her mother. BL majored in education. There were about two or three Chinese girls at UCLA. UCLA at that time had changed to the UC system from Normal school.
3	083-095 096-106	Chinese students were inactive at that time. But USC had a great deal of Chinese students activities. Lora Lee and BL were the only ones who went to their social functions. BL didn't believe the Chinese were too interested in politics.
4	107-126 127-138	BL got along well with China born Chinese. Albert Quon was the president of the Chinese Student (Association) of Southern California. They had many dances and dinner parties at Mami Leong's parent's house at 1619 Pico. Florence Meng, Mami Leong, Lora Lee and Bessie Loo were quite popular and were always together. They were called the "Four Horsemen."

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
4	139-151	After BL got married, she lost her job in 1929.
5	152-159 160-180 181-210	BL came to UCLA in 1924-1926. Got married in 1929. BL's husband was manager of Hong Co., in Los Angeles. Husband was an extra at first. Then he was chosen as an actor, from then on being an actor was his livelihood.
6	211-223 224-232	Before the <u>Good Earth</u> , BL was an extra in a couple of films. Associated mostly with Chinese, not with blacks.
7	233-257 258-270 271-287	In 1947, BL joined the China Society, and became president in 1960-63 and later 1969-71. The purpose of the Society is to promote the friendship between Chinese and Americans. BL was one of the charter members of the Los Angeles Chinese Women's Club in 1944. Mrs. Albert Quon was the founder. Americans didn't know the Chinese that well yet. The Chinese Women's Club was federated with the Los Angeles County Federation of Women's Clubs. BL was a board member.
8	288-296 297-309 310-324	BL helped I. Cummings' Home for the Aged, a Jewish organization and later became a member. At the beginning, Chinese did not participate in non-Chinese activities, due to the existence of prejudice. BL always sat on the side in the theatre when she went to school in Hanford.
9	325-333 334-347 348-370 371-386	BL was never confronted with any prejudice, except when they bought a home in Los Feliz, the neighbors had a meeting to discuss their move. After BL moved in, she got along very well with the neighbors and was invited to their home. The prejudice was due to ignorance--not knowing each other. BL's first home on East 20th Street and had no trouble in the 1930's. Because there, there were many Chinese and Japanese people. After they moved in to their Los Feliz home, the neighbors came to welcome them and they accepted them.
10	387-413	Partially, the (prejudice) was the Chinese own fault. In any function, they did not see a Chinese who went across the hall way to speak to a Caucasian. The Caucasians always came to speak to the Chinese first.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
10	414-426	BL had mostly Chinese friends. Later she had many Caucasian friends and still kept in touch with them.
	427-453	BL never went out too much with people in the entertainment circle. BL belong to the Screen Smart Set, a charitable organization in 1974.
11	454-469	BL joined the Federation of Women's Club before World War II. BL was one of the board members.
END OF TAPE 3 SIDE A		
1	002-011	Blank.
	012-028	The Los Angeles District Federation combined groups from five counties. BL was one of the Board members. She was the chairperson of the fundraising activities. BL gave fashion shows and raised a lot of money.
	029-033	Family associations usually were for men. They took wives along.
2	034-042	Thomas Wong, Albert Quan, Peter SooHoo, Sr. were the important people in Chinatown.
	043-061	Anna May Wong was a prominent Chinese actress, but never got ahead in the U.S. before she became famous in England.
	062-086	The Chinese in Chinatown all spoke Chinese in the meetings. The American born Chinese had different thinking than the Chinese organizations in Chinatown.
3	087-104	BL started getting \$5.00 a day as an extra. In those days, a pound of lamb chops was 25 cents. \$5.00 could buy a lot in the 30's.
4	105-119	In those days, Chinese did not have as much opportunity as they have today.
	120-123	China Society was formed to enhance the understanding of Chinese and American cultures to promote the friendship between Chinese and Americans.
	124-130	BL didn't know how much other people made.
	131-146	In Chinatown, Chinese lived near to each other. BL's friends lived all over the city, Beverly Hills, Los Feliz.
5	147-157	American born Chinese were more or less progressive. Chinatown Chinese don't go out to meet Caucasians.

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Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
5	158-162 163-165 166-171 172-195	BL didn't have relatives in China. Quite a number of BL's friends wrote to China. BL didn't know friends in gambling. In the old days there were lottery houses in Los Angeles. BL wanted to be modern so went out and purchased all modern furniture.
6	196-220	Brother went to Fresno for Chinese education. Later he was the principal of the Chinese school in Hanford. He was active and wanted to help people.
END OF TAPE 3 SIDE B		
1	001-008 009-020 021-024 025-037	Introduction. BL worked in the telegraph office less than a year. It didn't work that both of BL and her husband worked, one worked during the day time, one worked during evening. Some girl friends worked at the department store operating the elevators. The telegraph office job was a trained job.
2	038-050 051-053 054-060 061-069	BL's friends never had a prejudicial attitude. Only the street people would call her "Chink." Madame Chiang Kai Shek talked at the Hollywood Bowl in 1943. The event brought the Chinese prestige way up. BL was very proud to be Chinese. BL felt herself to be very Chinese, yet she felt herself as an American. BL felt slightly embarrassed when people didn't like Chinese culture and made remarks about Chinese. She always thought people were ignorant.
3	070-076 077-086 087-094 095-104	Mother didn't understand English. Children always interpreted for her. Sent Chinese to Chinese school and hired a Chinese tutor the the children. In the Hanford community, Chinese observed Chinese customs. BL was never allowed to go out with Chinese students who came to Hanford to work during the summer.
4	105-118 119-129 130-137	BL never dated in Hanford. BL was invited to Native Sons of Golden State functions. Shanghai people were more sophisticated than American born Chinese whose families were very restrictive. BL wasn't even allowed to marry outside of Sum Yup people.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
4	138-149	Chinese didn't approve of interracial marriages very much. BL felt perfectly all right with interracial married couples.
5	150-164	Mami Leong married a Caucasian.
	165-171	BL never had a preference of having a son to daughter.
	172-177	Most of the Chinese married in America. They met their husband or wife through different functions.
	178-182	BL's American born Chinese friends all stayed here and went back to China.
	183-190	BL thought Chinese education was very important but didn't have time to learn more Chinese.
6	191-209	Jewish honored and respected elders like Chinese did. In terms of doing business, Chinese are different from Jewish people on an individual basis.
	210-240	Many times BL disagreed with some ways Chinese were portrayed.
7	241-242	Anna May Wong played straight roles except a couple of derogatory roles.
	243-277	Some people didn't want to see Chinese play waiters. BL didn't like to see the Chinese always being ported as waiters, etc. After the Screen Extra Guild was formed, Chinese were more vocal.
8	278-294	Chinese were portrayed in a true manner in the film <u>Good Earth</u> . BL played several roles in it.
	295-312	Many Chinese were played in <u>Good Earth</u> .
	313-332	Benson Fong came in when the <u>Purple Heart</u> was filmed in the 1940's.
9	333-359	BL likes to think that she is successful in her work. BL is very unique in casting Asian actors and actresses.
	360-376	From time to time, BL feels that she has made progress and learned from her jobs.
	377-383	BL felt herself being a Chinese American.
10	384-389	BL always went to Chinatown for social functions.
	390-407	When BL had a family, she also cooked Chinese food. Now BL goes out for all kinds of food.
	408-413	BL plays bridge with her friends.
	414-423	BL was also on the Board of Committee to Conserve Chinese Culture.
	424-454	BL felt she was a middle person between actors/actresses and the American film companies.

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Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
1	001-012	Blank.
	013-018	Some of the actors and actresses were very sensitive.
	019-025	There were more roles and better roles for Asian performers.
	026-040	Chinese now are more or less trained and are more professional.
2	041-058	There was one or two occasions that Chinese actors were not treated right because they were Chinese.
END OF TAPE 4 SIDE B		
1	001-017	Introduction. (Note: The tape was recorded at the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California's meeting on May 6, 1981.)
	018-033	Opening remarks.
2	034-043	Emma Louie asked BL's baby carriage in the ladies' room at the Imperial Dynasty Restaurant at Hanford.
	044-080	The baby carriage was presented in a surprise testimonial party. After that, Richard Wing took it back to Hanford.
3	081-100	BL was brought up to be beautiful and seen but not heard. BL wasn't even sent to school until the age of 10. Father built a building. The temple there was restored.
	101-113	BL went to Chinese school and was surrounded by other students because they had never seen Chinese girls.
4	114-127	BL went to the theatre with her mother and was not allowed to sit without other people. Not until Honorable Woo went and fought with the manager in later days, that Chinese were allowed to sit in the center of the theatre.
	128-133	Husband came to Los Angeles and was a manager for the Hong Company.
	134-149	In 1936, all the Chinese who were interested in acting were interviewed for the film <u>Good Earth</u> .
5	150-176	A person who was in charge of hiring Chinese extras was getting money from the film company as well as from the extras. (He took a dollar out of the five dollars the extra made.) Lilly Louie was the casting director for two months. But they let her go because she didn't speak Chinese.

Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
5	177-189	BL was called to be the casting agent.
6&7	190-298	Chinese Cinema Players was formed on top of Chinese Village, a Chinese restaurant. During the Sino-Japanese War, the players collected old clothes, canned goods, and money and shipped them to China for the China Relief. Everybody worked voluntarily. They collected over \$2000 to send to China and got an appreciation letter. There was a Chinatown organization who took over the job and did nothing.
8	299-322	Whatever happened, BL and her friends felt quite proud of the Chinese actors and actresses. A lot of Chinese people were not educated enough to accept actors and actresses. They even went down to Wilmington and picketed the ship that would send in the scrap iron from Japan.
	323-347	Chinese were treated quite well, but never were given any important parts. BL told the studio people, "If you give them (Chinese) the part they will show you we can do more." It has been proven that members like Beulah Quo have done so many wonderful things.
9	348-368	Tom Gubbins was an agent for a while. Later the Central Casting asked BL to be the casting agent for them.
	369-426	Sometimes some Chinese, after losing money from lottery games, would call BL for a job in the morning at 5 o'clock. BL worked as a casting director during the day time, was an assistant to the director giving instructions to Chinese extras in Chinese.
10	427-482	There was the Screen Extras Guild, all the extras belonged to the guild. Then there was a Screen Actors Guild. Those who had to speak a line or so had to belong to the Screen Actors Guild. All that time BL was giving free service. After that BL was invited to be a sub-agent.

END OF TAPE 5 SIDE A

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Contents (cont'd)

Time Segment	Counter Number	Summary
1	001-013	Blank.
	014-021	BL became an agent and established her own business.
	022-064	Everybody felt that working in pictures was glamorous and fun. Sometimes she had to get a group of 500 extras. BL loved the excitement. But she went through some emotional incidents and it was sad that BL could not give a person a job due to the Union's regulations.
2	065-069	BL described how she selected a person to be an extra or actor.
3	070-098	There were few that solely depended on working in pictures. If one worked one week in movies they were probably doing better than working three months time at some other type of job.
	099-131	Anybody who wants to become an actor or extra, they must have pictures for BL's office because BL has to show these pictures to the studio people.
4&5	132-190	BL also did a play with Princess Der Ling at the Wilshire-Ebell theatre for a fundraiser. They spent two months learning how to perform Chinese opera. The play "Yellow Jacket" was played by many Chinese including Mrs. Ruth Wong, Lily Lee, etc. The money went to the International Medical Relief Society, Hong Kong Chinese Women Relief Association, and the Canton International Red Cross. The group of players were very patriotic and did everything they could to help their mother country.
6	191-218	The McCarthyism didn't really affect Chinese performers. As long as there was a part for Orientals, Chinese fit in anything. Someday Chinese may be able to play American parts too.
	219-242	BL had some players boycott several films that portrayed Chinese in a derogatory way, such as <u>Opium Eater</u> , the <u>Shanghai Gesture</u> , etc.

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END OF INTERVIEW

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